


Childhood Illness Inspires Nigerian to Malaria Action

Oluwamayowa Salu, a YALI Network member from Nigeria, founded the Iba [Yoruba word for malaria] Eradication Foundation and organizes malaria prevention and education efforts in Lagos and the surrounding areas.

“Malaria kills and we need to stop it.”

Sub-Saharan Africa suffers more cases of malaria each year than any other world region, mostly among children under 5 years of age, according to the World Health Organization. However, the toll of malaria is on the decline and deaths in the region are down almost 50 percent. Work of groups such as the Iba Eradication Foundation are key to that decline.

Oluwamayowa Salu shares his experiences and advice for other young leaders interested in starting similar disease-prevention campaigns in this interview.

A World Malaria Day program in Lagos  featured a bed net distribution. Pictured are Lagos U.S. Consul General Jeffery Hawkins, USCG Lagos' Deepa Sipes, Oluwamayowa Salu, and Ojosipe Bimbo. Photo courtesy O. Salu.

Question: Why are you interested in malaria prevention?

Salu: I grew up in one of the dirtiest places in Lagos — the commercial capital of Nigeria — called Bariga. It's mostly swampy, and this definitely meant lots of mosquitoes [the carriers of the disease-causing parasite].

My elder brother and I used to hide under a tattered mosquito net, but I still ended up with malaria again and again. I landed in hospitals many times to be treated for malaria instead of being in school. I lost some of my primary school years.

Because of this experience, I grew up saying I would do something about malaria, thus I founded my organization. I am awestruck to find out later that malaria kills a child every second. I am a lucky one to have survived the disease.


Q: How did you get the Iba Eradication Foundation started?

I started with material support from some organizations and I used my very small salary to support my organization till I gained some traction and recognition. I wrote proposals and letters to Exxon Mobil, Lagos State health agencies, Red Cross International and so many others. Our awards and seed grants also helped us move forward.

To implement our projects, we have worked in many communities and partner with the local

nongovernmental organizations, youth associations and community development organizations. So we get lots of volunteers from there and we have been able to build a huge database. We also make use of social media to recruit volunteers.

Q: The Iba Foundation has distributed insecticide-treated bed nets, a key measure to avoid nighttime mosquito bites, which can cause infection. How do Lagos citizens adapt to bed nets?

Keeping a neighborhood clean and  eliminating mosquito breeding places is a key part of the malaria eradication strategy.
Photo courtesy O. Salu.

Salu: There are some difficulties in the use of bed nets. This stems from the average size of a Lagos family, and the size of the house they inhabit. About four or five people might sleep in one room, so it becomes very inconvenient and difficult to use these nets. We have large-size nets, but using them may mean poor ventilation. Then, with Nigeria's power problem, there is often no electricity to power the fans for air circulation. So people prefer to sleep without the nets and bear the consequences.

Some people believe malaria is already part of our DNA, so there is no use sleeping under the nets. If you fall ill once every three or six months, that is the way of life. You walk into a pharmacy and buy some drugs to treat the illness. Many Nigerians believe that curing malaria is easier than preventing malaria.

But bed nets are only one of the methods of preventing mosquito bites. Convincing people to adopt these practices depends on using many behavioral communication tools.

We discovered lots of people muddle things up about malaria. Because of the very sharp rise in use of smartphones, we decided to create apps that can educate, inform and communicate behavioral change to people. Apps can be downloaded and accessed by anybody, anywhere, so they are faster than the use of pamphlets or town hall meetings. I have seen lots of malaria mobile apps developed by young people, and I have even developed one.

Comic books are another information tool we are working on. Children are the age group most affected, but I found that local education curriculum offers just two or three lines about mosquitoes and malaria. That is very bad.

With comics, you can create a generation that knows what to do and that will grow up with the right information about the disease. At Iba Foundation, our first malaria comic book publication will be in English language but our aim is to have it translated in many languages. Nigeria has over 250 tribes, and other sub-Saharan African countries are affected by the disease, so our work is well cut out for us. We will do it.

Q: How can other members of the YALI network become involved in disease-prevention education?

Salu: We need to innovate beyond use of bed nets. Malaria kills, and we need to stop it. I have read about what young people all over Africa are doing about educating people about malaria, but I think the very first step is to educate people about keeping the environment sparkling, spotlessly clean,

and eliminating the conditions that allow mosquitoes to breed. This is why environmental sanitation is central to our malaria eradication efforts.

Q: How have you seen bed net distribution and other educational activities improve practices and reduce disease in Lagos?

Salu: Bed net distribution has really reduced the disease drastically. Through the support of organizations like the U.S. President's Malaria Initiative, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Exxon Mobil's Malaria Initiative, the Roll Back Malaria Partnership and a working synergy between local government and NGOs, bed net distribution has reached lots of low-income families, and villages too.

For example, I have slept under a mosquito net every night for years now, and I have also helped distribute them through my organization to thousands of people. Malaria is becoming history for bed net users like me. We also collect data before and after our net distribution programs, and the impact has been remarkable. We did some research after one campaign and found that our educational programs helped reduce the number of malaria cases in one community by 45 percent.

Q: Do you find other young adults like yourself are generally aware of malaria prevention techniques, or do more YALI Network members need to help spread the message?

Salu: I am knowledgeable about malaria because it has affected me and I am passionate about ending it, but a lot of people are still very ignorant on how to avoid it. Some believe not staying under the sun, not overworking and avoiding eating bad food will reduce possibility of getting malaria, but those things are not true.

We definitely need more YALI Network members to spread the message, and we will be glad to incorporate interested YALI Network members into it.

At Iba Foundation, we are already looking at forming a youth malaria alliance all over sub-Saharan Africa. We know there are young people all over the sub-Saharan African region who have been affected by the disease in one way or the other and are very passionate to end it. We know young people have ideas and innovations to implement locally that could "fast-track" eradication of the disease. The alliance could offer them a platform to develop those ideas. We are hoping to start small and spread out, with support from both local and foreign organizations, of course.
